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# PIERRE KLOSSOWSKI'S *SADE MY NEIGHBOR* AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION

George Connell

Pierre Klossowski's *Sade My Neighbor* represents a fascinating example of a hermeneutics of suspicion directed toward a virulent if ignored atheist, the Marquis de Sade. Klossowski's book is especially interesting for three reasons. First, it discerns a specifically religious structure of thought and symbolism where many anticipate only madness and perverse sensuality. Second, it illustrates the function of perspective in a hermeneutics of suspicion. Third, it accentuates elements of Sade's thought that recur persistently in French post-structuralist thought and that suggest a pervasive defiant stance in that thought toward the divine, the eternal, and the normative.

While Christians and other theists have grown used to questions by non-believers about their motives and mental health, recent philosophers of religion have shown that suspicion is a double-edged sword. That is, questions about the hidden agendas, psychological complexes, and ideological blinders of non-believers are fully as legitimate as similar questions about believers.

Pierre Klossowski's *Sade My Neighbor*, written in the 1940s and 1960s but only recently translated into English, represents a fascinating example of a hermeneutics of suspicion directed toward a virulent if (at least in American philosophical circles) ignored atheist, the Marquis de Sade. Klossowski's book is especially interesting for three reasons. First, it discerns a specifically religious structure of thought and symbolism where many anticipate only madness and perverse sensuality. Second, it accentuates elements of Sade's thought that recur persistently in French post-structuralist thought. This recurrence is hardly surprising or accidental since Sade has been a particular favorite and persistent concern of French intellectuals since World War Two. In revealing the religious agenda of Sade's thought, Klossowski gives much needed clues to philosophers of religion trying to assess the religious significance of contemporary French thought. Third, Klossowski's studies illustrate the function of perspective in the hermeneutics of suspicion. In the 1940s when he wrote the essays that made up the first edition of *Sade My Neighbor*, Klossowski was a Catholic convert who had studied at a Dominican seminary before giving up plans to enter the priesthood. But the Klossowski of 1967, who wrote "The Philosopher-Villain" with which the second edition begins, has abandoned Catholicism and aligned himself with the anti-humanist wing



of French philosophy.<sup>1</sup> This change of perspective alters his reading of Sade—in the preface to the second edition he rejects the “pious intentions” and “monotheistic normalizations” of his earlier readings of Sade. But the break isn’t absolute. He allows three of the four essays of the first edition to be reprinted, either entirely or largely unchanged,<sup>2</sup> and even admits that the argumentation he now rejects is “perfectly coherent.” It is philosophically interesting to see how Klossowski’s reading of Sade both changes and retains a deeper consistency as his perspective changes. And it is especially interesting to see an atheist interpreter discern in an atheist thinker an on-going relation to the idea of God that is as ineluctable as it is defiant.

### I. *Sade and the Revolution*

Though the second edition of *Sade My Neighbor* opens with “The Philosopher-Villain,” the latest written of the essays in the book, the best entrance to Klossowski’s reading of Sade is the essay, “Sade and the Revolution,” the first of the 1947 essays reprinted in the second edition. Here, Klossowski places Sade in the context of the collapse of the *ancien régime* and the eruption of the revolution. In so doing, Klossowski shows that he, like so many young French intellectuals of the 1940s, was enthralled by Alexander Kojève’s reinterpretation of Hegel. Kojève’s reading of Hegel places supreme emphasis on the master-slave dialectic of the *Phenomenology*. And it is in those terms that Klossowski reads the French revolution. According to Klossowski, the great accomplishment of Medieval Christendom is the transformation of the harsh master-slave relations of the ancient world into the lord-servant relations of Feudalism. Because all persons in Christendom find their place in a theocratic hierarchy, because all in fulfilling their social roles ultimately serve God, there is a dignity and moral standing that extends even to the lowest members of society.

True to the spirit of Hegel, Klossowski traces the downfall of this theocratic order to an interior source: it succeeds itself to death. The specific genius of the theocratic hierarchy is concentration of power. Many vassals serve a single lord, many lords a single king, and many kings a single God. But as the king succeeds in consolidating his power, giving rise to a nation-state, he unknowingly sows the seeds of his own downfall. By gathering all political power to himself, the king renders the nobility redundant and thereby fundamentally alters the character of that estate. Stripped of their functions but not yet of their privileges, the nobles face a crisis of self-consciousness. For privilege separated from the functions that legitimate it is arbitrary self-indulgence. Unwilling to surrender that privilege and unable to justify it, the lords become cynical libertines who exist strictly for themselves rather than for vassals, king and God. According to Klossowski, Sade gives unequaled expression to this decadent, gratuitous existence in his tales of perversity and

cruelty. Specifically, Sade's predilection for sexual acts utterly unassociated with reproduction nicely symbolizes the unproductive, self-gratifying character of this class.

Though functionless, the nobility is not without influence: the rot of this mediating class spreads to the rest of society. The servants, unable to see themselves as serving God and king in catering to the arbitrary and decadent whims of their openly impious masters, find their own self-understanding thrown into crisis. Klossowski writes:

In the measure that this moral skepticism, this instigating or convinced atheism, spread into monarchical society, monarchical society reached a state of decomposition such that the feudal relations between lord and servant consecrated by theocratic hierarchy were already virtually broken: the ancient relationship of master and slave was de facto reestablished (SMN p. 52).

The atheism and debauchery of the lords places the servants, now degraded to slaves, in an appalling dilemma. On the one hand, the slaves may continue doggedly to believe in God, to obey the moral code, and to perform the duties of their station. But this is to submit to the depredations of those unbound by conscience. This Sade chronicles in *Justine* in which the virtuous heroine suffers endless abuse and outrage. (The subtitle of the book is "Good Conduct Well Chastized.") On the other hand, they may abandon belief in God, moral restraint, and feudal loyalty as does Justine's ruthless sister, Juliette, who rises to wealth and high social station. The choice between Justine's and Juliette's ways, the choice between victimage and victimizing, is truly a diabolical either/or.

It might appear that revolution, by wiping away the corrupt status quo and replacing it with a new moral and political order, represents a real third alternative to passive submission and active immorality, but Sade argues this is not so. For to take up arms against the masters (and ultimately the king) is to become one with the masters in their lawlessness; it is to make Juliette's choice. In "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would be Republicans" in *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, Sade argues that the consistent revolutionary, the consequent regicide, will draw the conclusion that all traditional morality is empty prejudice. In a perverse casuistry, Sade defends the moral blamelessness or even praiseworthiness of calumny, theft, prostitution, incest, rape, sodomy and murder. Despite masking itself as revisionist moral reasoning, the real force of these arguments is the subversion of moral decency as a whole. His point here is that to kill the king, to guillotine Louis XVI, is to aggress against morality generally and to join Juliette, not in a realm beyond good and evil, but as Klossowski puts it, in a "utopia of evil."

What sense can we make of Sade's absolutism on this issue? How should we understand his fantastic identification of the king with the moral order as a whole? Ironically, it is Sade's conservatism, his continued allegiance to the

thought-world of the theocratic order, that makes revolt an all or nothing proposition for him. In that thought-world, God, king and morality are not neatly distinguished, but each is the symbolic equivalent of the other, and all three the respective guises of the unitary authority of the theocratic order. It is in light of this triune structure of authority that Klossowski lays out the dialectic leading to revolution:

It is enough, then, for the lord to develop an existence for himself and give his privileges the form of an enjoyment for which he has no accounts to render to God or to anyone—to his servant less than anyone else—it is enough that the lord put in doubt the existence of God, and the whole edifice totters....

In his privileged state, the libertine great lord, if he is not resolutely an atheist, conceives of his existence as a provocation addressed to God at the same time as to the people. If he is resolutely an atheist, in disposing of the life of his servant as he pleases, in making of him a slave, the object of his pleasure, he makes the people understand that he has killed God in his own mind and that his prerogatives were nothing but the practice of crime with impunity. But the man who on the lowest level of the hierarchy had joined with God in serving has, now that God is dead at the summit of the hierarchy, fallen into the condition of a slave....

The servant who has become a slave as a result of atheism, or of the sacrilegious existence of his master, does indeed revolt; he then accepts the death of God. But when he goes to bring his master to trial, in the name of what will he do so, if not in the name of the prerogative of crime? He can only immediately become an accomplice in the revolt of his master against God and take up crime in his turn. The trial can have no other outcome but the assumption by the slaves of the prerogatives of the masters, and this will begin with the killing of the masters (SMN, pp. 53-55).

What lovely dialectical gymnastics! The lords, by killing God, provoke their own murders. The slaves, by revolting against their immoral masters, become themselves immoral masters. It lies, in fact, in the hands of the slaves to achieve objectively and publicly the decide the nobles committed only in their minds and boudoirs. Klossowski writes:

When the blade severs the head of Louis XVI, it is in Sade's eyes not the citizen Capet, or even the traitor, who dies. It is, in his eyes as in those of Joseph de Maistre and of all the Ultramontanists, the representative of God who dies. And it is the blood of the temporal representative of God, and in a deeper sense, the blood of God, that falls back upon the heads of the people in insurrection (SMN, p. 56).

It is the theological dimension of regicide that makes it, in Sade's eyes, a total act, an act propelling society into a "utopia of evil."

Klossowski's thesis that Sade elides political insurrection, atheism and immoralism begins to make sense of the otherwise utterly fantastic character of Sade's writings where decadent nobles break off in the middle of athletic

perversity to give harangues on political and especially religious topics. (As far as I can tell, most of Sade's diatribes against Christianity are uttered by and to characters who are naked and bleeding.) But does Klossowski go too far in privileging one of the three moments of Sade's triune object of attack: the religious? Note how frequently and how saliently the defiance or killing of God figures in Klossowski's description of political and social phenomena leading to the revolution. Specifically, note that he describes both the rejection of moral principle and the killing of the king as symbolic acts of deicide. In so doing, he suggests what he will later state: that Sade's agenda is fundamentally religious (or anti-religious). On this view, moral perversity and political subversion are occasions for defying or symbolically killing God, not ends in themselves.

Do Sade's writings bear Klossowski out on this point? On the contrary, Sade writes as if atheism is in the service of revolutionary politics or the hedonistic life. In "Yet Another Effort, Frenchman, If You Would be Republicans," Sade writes,

Frenchmen, I repeat to you: Europe awaits her deliverance from *scepter* and *censer* alike. Know well that you cannot possibly liberate her from royal tyranny without at the same time breaking for her the fetters of religious superstition: the shackles of the one are too intimately linked to those of the other; let one of the two survive, and you cannot avoid falling subject to the other you have left intact. It is no longer before the knees of either an imaginary being or a vile impostor a republican must prostrate himself; his only gods must now be *courage* and *liberty*. Rome disappeared immediately after Christianity was preached there, and France is doomed if she continues to revere it (S, p. 298).

Similarly, in *Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man*, Sade's mouthpiece rejects theism and morality as interfering with the satisfaction of desire.

By Nature created, created with very keen tastes, with very strong passions; placed on this earth for the sole purpose of yielding to them and satisfying them, and these effects of my creation being naught but necessities directly relating to Nature's fundamental designs or, if you prefer, naught but essential derivatives proceeding from her intentions in my regard, all in accordance with her laws, I repent not having acknowledged her omnipotence as fully as I might have done, I am only sorry for the modest use I made of the faculties (criminal in your view, perfectly ordinary in mine) she gave me to serve her; I did sometimes resist her, I repent it. Misled by your absurd doctrines, with them for arms I mindlessly challenged the desires instilled in me by a much diviner inspiration, and thereof do I repent: I only plucked an occasional flower when I might have gathered an ample harvest of fruit—such are the just grounds for the regrets I have, do me the honor of considering me incapable of harboring any others (S, pp. 165-6).

Note that in both these passages, Sade doesn't eliminate religious veneration. Instead, he displaces it from a transcendent God to immanent aspects of

reality, in the first case human courage and liberty and in the second Nature. In the following passage from *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, this displacement is to pleasure itself:

Let yourself go, Eugénie, abandon all your sense to pleasure, let it be the one object, the one god of your existence; it is to this god a girl ought to sacrifice everything, and in her eyes, nothing must be as holy as pleasure (S, p. 204).

Thus, Klossowski's claim that defiance of the Christian God is Sade's primary agenda and that republicanism and hedonism are simply means to that end conflicts with Sade's texts. But can we take those texts at face value? After all, a social order based on total immoralism where no one will have the right to refuse the sexual advances of anyone else and where neither theft nor murder will be prohibited or punished is utterly (and fortunately) unrealizable. So the picture of Sade as the practical revolutionary taking stances on moral and religious issues so as to consolidate power is implausible on its face. Similarly, the sexual excesses Sade imagines would destroy rather than maximize erotic pleasure, so simple hedonistic motives appear unable to do the job of explaining Sade's characters. But it remains for Klossowski to elaborate on and give evidence for his suspicious suggestion that behind Sade's revolutionary politics and moral perversity lies a despairing and defiant God-relationship as the real engine of his thoughts and deeds. This is the task of his subsequent articles.

## II. *Outline of Sade's System*

As noted above, Sade's characters frequently break off in the middle of fantastic orgies to deliver extended disquisitions on moral, political, religious and metaphysical topics. In his second 1947 essay, "Outline of Sade's System," Klossowski says his project is "to make explicit the system" that lies behind these harangues. But that is a misleading description since it implies that Sade's was a monolithic and static theoretical position. What Klossowski shows, instead, is a restless and dissatisfied Marquis trying out and throwing aside a variety of theoretical possibilities. To make sense of Sade's intellectual experimentation, to discern a dialectical progression in his thought, Klossowski posits several fundamental agendas at work in Sade. First, he identifies a project of self-expression: Sade, afflicted by "dark forces," seeks to verbalize those desires and imaginings to his contemporaries. But by pouring his strange, new wine into the unsupple wineskins of 18th century rationalism and materialism, Sade bursts those conceptual and terminological wineskins asunder. Though he speaks the language of mechanistic psychology and egoistic common sense, he "deconstructs" that vision of humankind.

But Sade, with his habitual violence, will make this language convey all it is capable of conveying; he will show its practical application in the hands

of precisely those whom common sense disowns. In this way he will reveal the absurdity of the mechanist psychology of his time and denounce its mendacity: it is not out of self-interest but to the contrary without the least concern for his own self-interest that man can act as we are pleased to describe him. And even when man thinks he is consciously obeying only his own egoism, in this case too he will always obey forces impenetrable to reason alone. Richer than he dared think, he will, if necessary, display a sinister generosity and sacrifice. No doubt Sade seems for a moment to agree with the determinism of the mechanists when, following the philosophical marching orders of his age, he says that man could not act otherwise. But he forthwith refutes their system, which situates, crudely, the lack of freedom in physiological reflexes, when he depicts for us man in those strange ways of acting and feeling that perversion commands (SMN, pp. 68-69).<sup>3</sup>

Besides but closely related to the agenda of self-expression, Klossowski discerns in Sade a project of self-justification born of bad conscience. In an unusual biographical aside, Klossowski even speculates that Sade intentionally provoked his own trials and incarcerations as "an outward projection of his inner trial" (SMN, p. 70). Whatever we make of this psychoanalytic suggestion, Sade's pervers unquestionably do spend much time and energy explaining to each other and to their apprentices why their perversions are blameless or even praiseworthy. They protest rather too much not to inspire a suspicion of bad-conscience. So Klossowski is on sound footing in identifying self-justification as a fundamental agenda behind Sade's theorizing. And in matters of conscience, the best defense is a good offense. Sade points an accusing, self-justifying finger at God in the inverted theology of Saint-Fond, a debauched noble in *Juliette*:

If the misfortunes that afflict me from the day I am born until the day I die prove his indifference to me, I may very well be mistaken upon what I call *evil*. What I thus characterize relative to myself seems indeed to be a very great good relative to the being who has brought me into the world; and if I receive *evil* from others, I enjoy the right to pay them back in kind, to be the first to cast the stone: so, henceforth, *evil* is good, just as it is for the author of my existence: the *evil* I do others makes me happy, as God is rendered happy by the *evil* he does me (S, p. 396; SMN, pp. 76-7).

Klossowski offers a perceptive gloss on this perverse theodicy:

Thus, "far from denying God as the atheist does, or washing him of his offenses as the deist does," the mind of the debauched libertine agrees to admit God with all his vices. The existence of evil in the world gives this mind the means to blackmail God, the eternally Guilty Party because the original Aggressor, and for this end it always resorts to moral categories as to a pact that God has violated. Suffering becomes a bill of exchange made out on God (SMN, p. 78).

According to Klossowski, Saint-Fond gives away the secret of Sade's supposed atheism. Where true atheism is "to live without God in the world,"



Sade and his characters, even though they usually profess atheism, live in a world haunted by a God they insult and defy as well as deny. And their compulsive defiance gives the lie to their declared atheism:

The negative relationship with God is indispensable: the libertine mind, we could say with Sade, is not "coldly" atheist; it is atheist through its effervescence, therefore out of resentment. Its atheism is but a form of sacrilege. Only the profanation of the symbols of religion can make its apparent atheism convincing to itself. In this it is clearly distinguishable from the mind of the atheist philosopher, for which sacrilege has no other significance than that of revealing the weakness of the one who indulges in it (SMN, p. 74).<sup>4</sup>

The conflicted and self-defeating character of Sade's atheism—he and his characters deny God so as to spite God—parallels perfectly the conflicted and self-defeating character of both of the Sadean agendas Klossowski highlights. In seeking self-expression, Sade seeks to translate perverse consciousness, which is essentially anti-universal, into a universal medium, language.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, he seeks to salve a bad-conscience by offering moral arguments for moral nihilism.

The structural similarities of these self-defeating agendas is no accident. As we saw above, Sade identifies God with norms in general. Klossowski's translator, Alphonso Lingis, notes in his introduction that:

God would be the ultimate formula for norms. God then would be the counterpart of the realm of the general and the generic, the realm of the species, the imperative of the species in the individual. God would be the formula for the integrity of natural man, species man, in the individual (SMN, pp. xii-xiii).

In "Sade and the Revolution," the emphasis fell on the political order. But language and morality are also, in Sade's eyes, manifestations of the divine as the universal. Thus to try to translate perversity into language and to justify it morally is to universalize the anomalous, to generalize the essentially singular, to endorse implicitly the normative order one explicitly attacks, to acknowledge God in denying God. It is a hopelessly conflicted undertaking.

### III. *Under the Mask of Atheism*

In the third of the 1947 essays reprinted in the second edition of *Sade, My Neighbor*, Klossowski discerns the same structure of internal conflict in Sade's erotic imagination that he finds in Sade's theoretical agendas. In particular, Klossowski focuses on the terrible ambivalence of Sade toward the image of the virgin:

The virgin is an image of divine purity; at the same time she is a sign of the fall of him who desires her simply as a creature. As an image of the purity of God, the virgin is excluded from possession by man; but man cannot forget that she is possessable. She becomes in Sade a motif of exasperation, and prohibition, of virility (SMN, p. 103).

Indeed, all of Sade's work has appeared to us as one desperate cry, hurled at the image of inaccessible virginity, a cry enveloped and as it were enshrined in a canticle of blasphemies: I am excluded from purity, but at the same time I am impure because I wish to enjoy purity, which excludes enjoyment (SMN, p. 105).

This impotent exasperation and hopeless self-conflict perfectly epitomizes the image of Sade presented in Klossowski's 1947 essays. But it is here in "Under the Mask of Atheism" that Klossowski claims to unveil the ultimate religious basis of Sade's conflicted imagination and desire.

In the soul of this libertine great lord of the century of the Enlightenment, very old mental structures are reawakened; it is impossible not to recognize the whole ancient system of the Manichaean gnos̄is, the visions of Basilides, Valentinus, and especially Marcion. Such a conception once again has its source in the sentiment of a fall of the spirit and the obscure memory of original purity. The present state attests to a fall, and the present age can be filled only with waiting, in the absence of any redemption—only with the sentiment of an unceasing fall, of a progressive degradation. Such a conception, contrary to every idea of progress, radically opposes Sade to his whole century....

The act of creation is itself a consequence of the fall; creating is the act of revolt of a demiurge against the pure God of the spirits. The whole of creation then bears the seal of a curse; the human body, like every physical organism, is the image not of a divine creator but of the imprisonment of the spirits....

We thus understand why Sade's clandestine work shows much more natural affinity with the great heresiarchs of Gnosticism. The erotic scenes themselves are distinguishable from the current literary genre of his age by the hatred of the body, by the impatience provoked in his heroes by the patient men and women they torment, and by the frenzied cult of orgasm, which was in certain Manichaean sects a form of the cult of *original light* (SMN, p. 100).

Once creation is conceived as impure, the desire for purity takes the form of destruction. But as Diotima points out in Plato's *Symposium*, desire longs for the perpetual possession of its beloved object. How, then, to join these opposed aspirations to destroy and possess? Cruelty as sustained destruction is Sade's answer. Klossowski writes:

For Sade, purity can only be disembodied and can result only from destruction, and fidelity can consist only in an indefatigable assault on the same victim. Thus cruelty for him is a fidelity, and an homage to the virgin and to God, an homage become incomprehensible to itself (SMN, p. 105).

How remarkable! If Klossowski is correct, Sade, in spite of all appearances, against all his intentions, and completely counter to his explicit self-understanding, renders homage to God in both his actual and imagined acts of cruel perversity. This homage is doubly unclear since it misunderstands both itself

(by believing itself to be defiance) and its object (by viewing God through the distorting lens of Gnostic myth). Klossowski gives an unabashedly theological account of Sade's double obscurity and the irrational forces that obscurity sets in motion.

These forces tend to a light and also into a darkness that the rational morality of self-interest and conscience reduced to social proportions can only be unaware of. This light and this darkness are known only in the revealed order; these dark forces require, not a Supreme Being, but the reference to a personal God who alone knows them, whose curse they have suffered to the point of having forgotten this God. In those whom these forces move and overwhelm, after having forgotten their judge, there remains now only the movement unto darkness that ends in the oblivion of their own existence. The world Sade describes for us is that of fault which comes to be unaware of itself once more (SMN, pp. 108-9).

Here, the Klossowski of 1947 sets before us the ultimate principle of his hermeneutics of suspicion: sin, estrangement from God, has devastating epistemological as well as moral consequences to the point that the sinful self may come to misunderstand itself fundamentally. But Klossowski's Christian hermeneutic isn't simply alien to atheistic forms of suspicion. In a passage quoted above, Klossowski identifies Sade's aggressive, sacrilegious atheism as resentment of God. Despite their very different beliefs and interpretive assumptions, both Klossowski and Nietzsche are aware that behind vociferous attacks may lie envy, admiration, or even, as Klossowski puts it, homage.

#### IV. *The Philosopher-Villain*

It wasn't necessary to compare Klossowski and Nietzsche to show that theistic and atheistic hermeneutics of suspicion may simultaneously differ fundamentally and yet agree on much: that principle is compellingly established by comparing the Klossowski of the 1960s with the Klossowski of the 1940s. Though Klossowski has rejected Christianity in the intervening years, he stands by much of what he said in his earlier articles on Sade. In the first paragraph of the Preface to the 1967 edition, he writes:

In distancing myself from the state of mind that made me write, "Sade my neighbor," I do not find myself any closer to those who have always taken Sade's atheism to be fundamental, and as a proof of the liberating force of a liberated thought. Liberated from God—whom atheism declares to be nothing—had this thought then liberated itself from nothing? Would its freedom also be for...nothing? (SMN, p. 5).

His point here is that Sade's atheism isn't simply "to live without God in the world"; it isn't simply absence of relation. It is defiant relation. The God whom Sade defies by his outrages and blasphemies is still the God of the theocratic order who subsumes all normative principles, be they political, moral, or linguistic. And Klossowski still sees Sade locked in a self-contradiction.

dictory dialectic of simultaneously affirming and denying this normative structure. In "The Philosopher-Villain," the new essay in the 1967 edition, he writes:

In outrage what is outraged is maintained to serve as support for transgression (SMN, p. 18).

Transgression presupposes the existing order, the apparent maintenance of norms under which energy accumulates thereby making transgression necessary (SMN, p. 19).

If the human race as a whole "degenerated," if there were no one left but avowed perverts—if integral monstrosity would thus prevail—one might think that Sade's "goal" would have been reached, that there would no longer be any "monsters" and "sadism" would disappear.... [I]ntegral monstrosity can be realized only within the conditions that made sadism possible, within a space composed of obstacles, that is, in the logically structured language of norms and institutions. The absence of logical structure can be verified only through the given logic, even when it is the false logic that by refusing monstrosity provokes it. In turn, monstrosity or anomaly, according to Sade, brings out the given norms and affirms itself only negatively. It is not surprising then that in Sade's descriptions the norms, the existing institutions, structure the very form of perversions (SMN, pp. 20-1).

Though the conceptual terrain of "The Philosopher-Villain" is essentially the same as that of the 1947 articles, he no longer places Sade "under the sign of Jonah." Earlier, he depicted Sade's outrages and blasphemies as futile attempts to evade, to break relations with, or even to kill God. But in "The Philosopher-Villain," the motion is reversed. In the later essay, Klossowski says Sade carries through to its consequent conclusion the atheistic movement begun but left half-finished by the rational atheists contemporary with Sade. That atheism understands itself as securing its own autonomy by abolishing all alien authority. But it then proposes to use that autonomy to reestablish the norms God had previously underwritten. Sade calls into question both this reestablishment of norms and, more importantly, the very self that proposes to reestablish those norms. Klossowski writes:

For Sade this atheism is still nothing but an inverted monotheism, only apparently purified of idolatry and scarcely distinguishable from deism. Just as the deist certified the notion of God, this atheism stands as a guarantee of the responsible ego, its possession and individual identity. For atheism to be purified of this inverted monotheism, it must become integral....

Reason would like to be wholly free of God. Sade—in a very underhanded way—wishes to free though from all preestablished normative reason: integral atheism will be the end of anthropomorphic reason....

If [Sade's] characters refer their anomalous acts to normative reason, they do so in a way that lays waste the autonomy of reason. They deride and demonstrate the vanity of a reason that, in its supreme act, atheism, claims to

guarantee human forms of behavior. Unless atheism is reconceived on the basis of phenomena that reason rejects, it will continue to consolidate the existing institutions based on anthropomorphic norms. One then has this dilemma: either reason itself is excluded from its autonomous decision—atheism—which is to forestall monstrosity in man, or else monstrosity is once again removed from all possible argumentation (SMN, pp. 15-6).

Note well that the dilemma of autonomous reason to which Klossowski refers is none other than that proposed in numerous moral arguments for the existence of God. Reason must either recognize a higher authority (God) or else find itself without moorings and therefore subject to the currents of inclination. This is, for example, exactly the same argument C. S. Lewis makes throughout *The Abolition of Man*. While there are any number of other versions of this argument I could have cited, I chose Lewis because he, like Klossowski and the French anti-humanists, sees the issues of norms as directly linked to the issue of the integral, responsible self. But where Lewis appeals to our deep commitment to the idea of the self as responsible and worthy of respect to persuade us that there is an objective, even divine, structure of norms, Klossowski sees Sade agressing against all norms and the self who lives by those norms. Whereas, in the 1940s, Klossowski has seized on the image of the virgin as the axis around which Sade's thoughts and imaginings turned, now he identifies sodomy as the "key sign."

An absolutely central case of perversity, which Sade will take as the basis for interpreting all others, as the principle of affinity in what will form integral monstrosity, is the case of sodomy.

This biblical term, consecrated by moral theology, covers an action that is not limited to homosexual practice. Homosexuality, which is not an intrinsic perversion, must be distinguished from sodomy, which is. Like heterosexual forms of behavior, homosexual practices admit of giving rise to an institution, as has been seen many times in the history of the human societies. But sodomy is formulated by a specific gesture of countergenerality, the most significant in Sade's eyes—that which strikes precisely at the law of the propagation of the species and thus *bears witness to the death of the species in the individual*. It evinces an attitude not only of refusal but of aggression; in being the simulacrum of the act of generation, it is a mockery of it. In this sense it is also a *simulacrum of metamorphosis*, always accompanied by a sort of magic fascination. The sodomist gesture, transgressing the organic specificity of individuals, introduces into existence the principle of the metamorphosis of beings into one another, which integral monstrosity tends to reproduce and which universal prostitution, the ultimate application of atheism, postulates (SMN, pp. 24-5).

Alphonso Lingis's statement of this point in the translator's introduction is even more graphic:

Sodomy is not anal eroticism, a natural and animal pleasure; it is anal eroticism biblically and theologically interpreted as an act that functions neither

for the reproduction of the species nor for species bonding, as an act done to gore the partner and release the germ of the species in his excrement. Thus sodomy, theologically interpreted as an assault on the human species as such, an act of monstrous singularity, and an act directed against God, the ultimate formula for all norms (SMN, p. xiii).

### V. Conclusion

While Klossowski is not nearly as well-known in the English-speaking world as other contemporary French thinkers, his essays on Sade are most useful in calling to our attention a stance toward ethics and religion that is widespread in contemporary French thought.

(1) The centrality of the transgressive gesture: In Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, Deleuze, Guattari, and others, the spirit of subversion is ubiquitous. Such a spirit of subversion unquestionably has an appeal for Christian philosophers—after all, Jesus and the prophets embodied radical challenges to their respective status quos. But Jesus and the prophets challenged the prevailing structures of human norms in the name of a transcendent authority. In contrast, French post-structuralists often appear to carry out subversion in the name of nothing other than subversion itself. Klossowski's Sade similarly commits perverse acts *because* they transgress norms, *because* they are perverse.

(2) The tendency to regard norms as monolithic: In Derrida, logocentrism, ontotheology and phallogentrism all seem to denote a single and ironically self-identical set of norms that has oppressed and still oppresses an ever-expanding portion of humankind. Similarly, Lacan and his feminist followers, notably Kristeva, identify the phallus as the symbol of linguistic, logical, social and political norms. Just as norms in general are associated with males and male domination, the feminine is associated with the subversion of all norms. Above we saw that Klossowski's Sade is incapable of separating God, king and moral order.<sup>6</sup>

(3) A hostility to the idea of the integral self: Post-war French philosophy is often periodized into humanist and anti-humanist phases. Existentialism and phenomenology are labelled humanist because of their emphasis on the individual human as the locus and creator of meaning. Both structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers have radically challenged this emphasis on the individual human subject. A vivid example of this attack is Foucault's declaration at the end of *The Order of Things* that the era of "man" is now past. The same hostility underlies the profound suspicion of the idea of the author in contemporary French literary theory. The picture Klossowski paints of Sade in "The Philosopher-Villain" conforms so perfectly to this aspect of French anti-humanist thought that one cannot resist suspecting that he is reading contemporary thought back into Sade. Of course, it could be that French anti-humanism simply carries on Sade's legacy.

It would appear that the spirit of the Marquis is alive and well today and feels at home in the Latin Quarter and especially at the University of Paris-Vincennes (which, ironically, stands on the same tract of land as had the prison where Sade was sent for his first incarceration).

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## NOTES

1. For a discussion of the periodization of post-war French philosophy into humanist and anti-humanist phases, see Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

2. See Jane Gallup, *Intersections* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), p. 101ff.

3. Klossowski's Sade calls to mind Dostoevsky's Underground Man whose irrational and self-destructive behaviors represent the passionate if futile protests against the organ stop, the crystal palace and the ant hill.

4. Klossowski's suggestion here is strikingly reminiscent of Johannes Climacus's discussion of "the acoustic illusion" in *Philosophical Fragments*: Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, translated by Edna and Howard Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 49-54.

5. See SMN p. 93; see also pp. 14, 25, 27.

6. For an important exception to the tendency, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

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